

The

Communicator

NHTC

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020

BROADBAND:
HELPING YOU CONNECT



DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY

New Hope native
graduates from
West Point



COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Funeral service industry
benefits from broadband

LONG-DISTANCE BONDS

Broadband makes connections
across the miles



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Broadband matters now more than ever

Rural broadband providers are supporting two critical bills making their way through Congress. One would secure present efforts to keep you connected, while the other provides support for future broadband expansion.

The Keeping Critical Connections Act was introduced earlier this year by U.S. Sens. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and Kevin Cramer, R-N.D. This bill would appropriate \$2 billion to help smaller broadband companies who worked with struggling customers during the pandemic and who did not disconnect those who couldn't pay.

As the health crisis and economic shutdown disrupted millions of lives, internet providers across the country took the Pledge to Keep Americans Connected by waiving late fees, opening community Wi-Fi hot spots, and not terminating service to customers because of their inability to pay their bills.

For all this good work, however, our members have seen uncollectibles rise. NTCA members have on average some \$80,000 in accumulated nonpayments by customers since the pandemic hit. These are significant amounts, as these broadband providers are often small companies with fewer than 30 employees. Keeping Critical Connections will help them continue serving their communities.

In terms of long-term deployment, NTCA also supports the Rural Connectivity Advancement Program Act of 2020, introduced by U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-S.D. This bill would set aside a portion of the proceeds from FCC spectrum auctions to fund rural broadband deployment.

These bills will help broadband providers like yours continue their work to ensure every American has access to the communications services necessary in today's world. 📶



Podcast listenership continues to grow as Americans increasingly turn to the audio format for news, entertainment and learning. “Podcasts now reach over 100 million Americans every month,” said Tom Webster, senior vice president of Edison Research, whose Infinite Dial research reveals that 37% of Americans listen to podcasts every month.

That's an increase from 32% just one year ago. That number has climbed steadily as more content becomes available to appeal to a wide range of interests.

Two new podcasts have been released this year that address a topic of growing importance: rural broadband.

Heading into 2020, rural broadband had become a major point of focus in the U.S., with an increasing number of state and federal programs aimed at solving the lack of broadband access in parts of rural America. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted businesses, schools and health care delivery, the need for nationwide broadband access was amplified.



A podcast from NTCA



In February, NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association launched its “**Smart Rural Communities**” podcast. The show takes a look at rural broadband providers who are bringing advanced digital infrastructure to small towns and regions through powerful fiber networks. These broadband networks are jumpstarting economic growth, igniting educational opportunities and improving health care in some of America's most remote areas.

“**Rural Broadband Today**” launched in June. This podcast tells the stories of those working to bring broadband internet access within reach of every citizen. The interview-style show presents conversations with elected officials, industry experts and business leaders at the forefront of America's efforts to solve the rural broadband challenge. It's produced by WordSouth — A Content Marketing Company. 📻

Both podcasts can be found on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or by visiting www.ntca.org/smart and www.ruralbroadbandtoday.com.

Can you see me now?

Videoconferencing technologies empower remote work



If you've found yourself logging on for more video meetings at work lately, you're not alone. According to the 2019 Impact of Video Conferencing Report by Lifesize, 48% of business professionals say their use of videoconferencing at work has increased compared to two years ago.

And that study was before a global pandemic drove even more companies to work remotely. Videoconferencing isn't without limitations, but businesses and workers are finding it an essential tool for empowering remote work.

FLEXIBILITY

With videoconferencing, employees and contractors can work from home while still collaborating with their teams and attending important meetings. The flexibility enables individuals in rural communities to not only have more control over their work-life balance but also "telecommute" to urban companies for better opportunities.

Companies also benefit from the ability to recruit talent from anywhere. Business owners have the freedom to set up shop in rural communities, for example, then employ or partner with experts from around the world.

CONNECTION

Video teleconferencing not only empowers remote productivity but also helps workers overcome some of its challenges. According to Buffer's 2019 State of Remote Work Study, 19% of remote workers cite loneliness as their biggest struggle when working remotely. Video calls can help.

Compared to telephone conferences, video calls make it easier to form connections. The experience more closely reflects face-to-face

encounters. For example, participants can see facial expressions and body language to better identify how others are responding to their ideas as they collaborate on projects.

SAVINGS

When teams work over videoconferencing platforms, everyone involved saves time and money. Cutting a commute across town — or in some cases, the globe — benefits people's schedules, companies' bottom lines and even the environment.

Plus, the work itself can be more efficient online. In the Lifesize study, 89% of respondents agreed that videoconferencing reduces the time it takes to complete projects or tasks. People may be more likely to enter an online meeting with an agenda and honor the scheduled start and end times. Plus, they can avoid the interruptions common to in-office meetings.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

Despite its many benefits, videoconferencing isn't without challenges. Not all tech tools are secure, so companies must research available options carefully to protect their employees and data. Team leaders must make an effort to coordinate meetings ahead of time to ensure everyone is online and available. And if any employees lack access to fast, reliable internet, technical difficulties can bring meetings to a frustrating halt.

Despite their drawbacks, videoconferencing platforms are here to stay. In the Buffer survey, 99% of respondents agreed they'd like to work remotely at least some of the time for the rest of their careers. Thanks to the increasingly widespread use of videoconferencing technology, they just might. ☎

Three options for effective videoconferencing

1 ClickMeeting

For interactive meetings and webinars, try ClickMeeting. Presenters can share their screen, run live Q&A sessions to engage the audience and collect valuable attendee data using polls. With an automated follow-up feature, this platform makes it easy to keep the momentum going after a webinar ends.

2 Microsoft Teams

For a platform that scales with ease, check out Microsoft Teams. Users can schedule video meetings with a single person or run large webinars and meetings of up to 10,000 participants. A long list of features and functionalities makes it a top choice for many businesses.

3 Google Meet

For fans of the Google Suite, Google Meet is a convenient choice that smoothly integrates with other applications like Google Calendar and Gmail. Participants can easily join in from their web browser or dial in to listen from anywhere. This platform has big-business capabilities without the big-business price tag, making it a great option for growing companies.

Bringing people together when we have to be apart

The farmers, businesspeople and other residents who founded our cooperative knew technology could help them keep in touch with others near and far. For decades, technology has helped them create and maintain these essential human connections.



DANIEL MARTIN
General Manager

Because of the telephone lines we strung across our part of Alabama, parents could talk with children and grandchildren who had moved away. With that technology, sons and daughters serving their country at military bases from coast to coast had a lifeline back home. If bad weather rolled through, we could call and check on friends and family, and if trouble did strike we could reach help by calling first responders.

Building our phone network connected the people of our communities like never before.

Today, I think those founding members would be amazed at the ways we use the technology highlighted in this issue to stay connected.

Thanks to the broadband network NHTC provides, we upload photos of our gardens, craft projects or baking creations to share with friends and families within our community or around the country.

We share videos of first steps, birthdays and graduations through social media platforms. Streaming video has allowed us to virtually attend classes or church. Video calls allow us to catch up with friends and families, hold meetings for work or participate in virtual Sunday school.

Even when we use cellular networks to make video calls, it's often the fiber optic backbone we've built that connects the cell towers.

The pandemic has significantly sped up our willingness to adopt such technology. I've seen experts suggest that in the last three to five months, Americans have used virtual meetings, video chat and applications at levels we weren't projected to reach for another three to five years.

Perhaps you've embraced new technology during this unusual year. Even if it's not virtual meetings, many members have, for the first time, tried paying bills over the web or online shopping.

I appreciate your patience and willingness to learn these new skills. I know I'm ready for things to get back to normal, but I'm proud to see the difference our cooperative makes in keeping our community connected — no matter how you choose to do that today or in the future. 📞

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL COOPERATIVE MONTH

Every year, we take time to recognize National Cooperative Month, and I never pass up a chance to celebrate our cooperative story. I will always appreciate the bold decision by the local residents to band together to found NHTC. No other company was willing to invest in a telecommunications network in our area, so they took it upon themselves to bring our region into the modern era. Their cooperative spirit lives on today through our board and employees who proudly continue the tradition of connecting our members through technology. Thank you to our members for your continued support!

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On the Cover:



New Hope native Ryne Hicks graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in June. See story Page 12.

WE APPRECIATE OUR CUSTOMERS!

NHTC's Customer Appreciation Day has been tentatively set for Friday, Oct. 30, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the New Hope office on Main Drive. For the latest news, and to confirm that NHTC is proceeding with the event, visit our website and Facebook page.

Scholarship winners

Carly Blankenship, a New Hope High School graduate, received a \$1,500 college scholarship from NHTC. She plans to attend The University of Alabama to study microbiology and then pursue a master's or doctorate degree in neuroscience. Blankenship achieved a 4.2 GPA and was a member of the National Honor Society.

Blankenship's extracurricular activities included junior varsity softball, varsity cross country, Art Club, Anchor Club, Student Lighthouse Team, Indian Education, Leo Club and Student Government. She also works at Chick-fil-A in Owens Cross Roads.

Awards included DAR Youth Citizenship, DAR Good Citizen and Chamber of Commerce Spotlight Student. She had the highest average in AP Language, CP Chemistry, Government and Economics.

Her parents are Myra and Mike Blankenship.



Zoe Epperson, a Kate Duncan Smith DAR High School graduate, received a \$1,500 college scholarship from NHTC. She plans to attend Northeast Alabama Community College and study biology. She plans to later attend Wallace State Community College to become a dental hygienist before studying dental health at The University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Epperson achieved a 4.0 GPA and was a member of the National Honor Society.

Extracurricular activities included Spanish Honors Society, Historical Society, Mu Alpha Theta, Beta Club, Leo Club, Art Club, Hospitality Club, junior varsity volleyball team, junior varsity cheerleading squad, varsity cheerleading squad, a competition cheering squad, All-American cheerleading squad, All-American Cheerleader Association, and varsity track and field.

Her parents are James Epperson and Cathy Epperson.



Because I CARE

Don't miss an opportunity to support The CARE Center by participating in the 18th annual Because I CARE Golf Tournament at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail at Hampton Cove on Friday, Oct. 16.

Registration for the event begins at 10:30 a.m., followed by a putting competition at 11 a.m. and a shotgun start at noon.

The cost is \$125 per player or \$500 per team, and there is a \$20 mulligan package per player. Fees include range balls, green fees, cart and lunch.

For sponsorship information, contact Andrea Bridges, executive director at The CARE Center, at 256-723-2273, or learn more about the event on The CARE Center's social media.

The CARE Center is a nonprofit, faith-based organization that serves southeast Madison County through education, employment and crisis services.

During the pandemic, The CARE Center pivoted from a developmental organization to focus on the COVID-19 crisis, working to meet the needs of neighbors, supporting various feeding programs and providing financial assistance to those in need.

Holiday closing

NHTC will be closed for Labor Day on Monday, Sept. 7. Wishing everyone a happy and safe holiday!

GET ORGANIZED

It's easy and fulfilling ... really

Walk into a well-organized home, and you experience a sense of freedom. Freedom from clutter, freedom from chaos and freedom from the claustrophobia that comes from a house in disarray.

People become frustrated when they can't find the things they need, says Liz Jenkins, a certified professional organizer and owner of A Fresh Space in Nashville.

"The visual distractions make it hard to be productive because everywhere you look, there is something that needs to be done," she says. "People who have disorganized homes are often very frazzled people because nothing ever seems to go smoothly for them, and that's caused by the chaos around them that prevents them from functioning properly."

The key to organization requires letting go of what is not used, loved or functional, says Houston-based Ellen Delap. She is past president of the National Association of Productivity

and Organizing and a certified professional organizer at professional-organizer.com.

"Work with a partner, and donate those items to a cause that is important to you," she says. "True editing means that you have decided that you have 'enough' and you only need to keep what is essential. This is for all types of organizing in your home, whether it is your kids' clothes or toys, your kitchen, your garage, or your closet. Think of decluttering as peeling the layers of an onion. Go layer by layer until you have what is needed and precious."

There are several areas around the house that are considered clutter "hot spots," according to Delap.

The garage: This is one of the biggest hot spots, because it's often the dumping ground for things people don't know what to do with, as well as the last spot anyone gets organized. Garages are commonly not where we park the car. That is where large items are placed before a final decision is made. Those items sit in the garage over a period of time.

When garage-cleaning day arrives, make sure you have plenty of heavy-duty trash bags, basic cleaning supplies, empty boxes for collecting items for donation and plastic containers in varying sizes to categorize and store tools and other items. This type of edit may create space so that you can actually park your car.

The kitchen and pantry: This is a challenging area that's the hub of your home. Get organized by creating zones to help you get meals and snacks easily prepared, such as a coffee zone and areas for keeping knives, cutting boards and bowls together. Create a baking zone with your whisks and other utensils in one drawer. Near your stove, store pots and pans.

Pantry organizing starts with editing and decluttering. Empty it all out. Then group items as grocery stores do, in categories like breakfast, snacks, beverages, baking and condiments. Place frequently used items at eye level for adults for easy access. For your kids, use open baskets with food at their level to help them independently access snacks. An organized kitchen and pantry make it a joy to prepare meals together.

Master closets: People don't go through their clothes often enough, so things tend to pile on top of each other. Your closet is where you create the start of a great day. Begin with letting go of clothes that are too big or uncomfortable or clothes you would not want to be seen wearing. This is more easily done with a "clutter buddy" who helps you decide if that's your best look, what you love or even what fits properly.



Creating a well-organized space means letting go of items that are not used often.

Edit out what you have seldom worn, and arrange your clothes in categories that work for you. Some of us prefer color to organize our clothes, while some of us prefer to organize outfits. You know what works best for you. If you have multiple closets, cull down to one closet for each season, or have two closets — one for dressy clothes and one for daily wear.

The laundry room: It's easy for things to pile up in a laundry room, such as clean clothes forgotten on a folding table. It's important to establish a laundry routine that sets up days of the week for completing a load, meaning that you get it from the dryer back to the closet in one day. If you stick to it, you'll find your life goes much more smoothly, with no last-minute searching for that matching blue sock.

The home office: This is the room in the house that often becomes a dumping ground for all things. Create a command center where you can triage incoming paper into categories: to do, to pay and to file. Next, organize your files by context, such as home, auto, financial and personal. Finally, create an archive section for papers you need to keep. This section could include taxes, legal documents and those papers you want to keep longer than one year. Move papers throughout your process so that there is a flow.

Remember your goal when you're knee-deep in decluttering your life: to restore the rooms in your home to their original use and intended function. 🗑️

FIVE EASY ORGANIZING TIPS

Professional home organizer Liz Jenkins often finds that clients who are disorganized lead "frazzled" lives. "Nothing ever seems to go smoothly for them because of the chaos around them that prevents them from functioning properly," she says.

Here are some tips for organizing your living space and, thereby, your life.

1. Create "homes" for groups of items that belong together, ideally in the spaces where you use them.
2. Use containers to corral groups of items on shelves or in drawers.
3. Label everything!
4. Reduce what you bring into the house. The less you have, the less you have to store.
5. Dedicate time every day to getting and staying organized. Even five minutes tossing unwanted items away every day will make a huge impact in the long run.



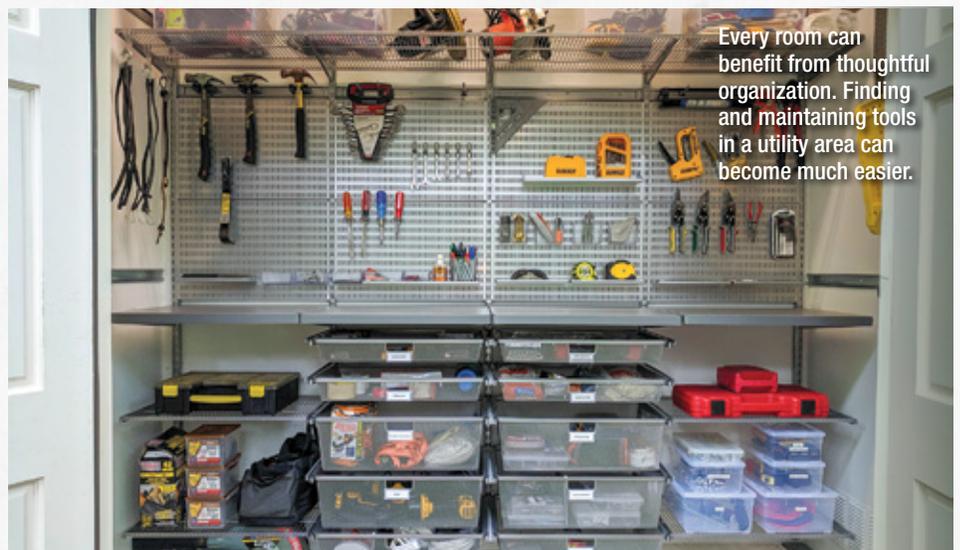
A neat pantry can simplify meal prep and reduce stress.



Group like items into well-marked containers.

Looking for someone to help?

Consider hiring a professional like you would a personal trainer or other service provider to make your home a haven and place to relax. The NAPO website — www.napo.net — has a directory that helps you find a local professional who can help with organizing, decluttering and even productivity.



Every room can benefit from thoughtful organization. Finding and maintaining tools in a utility area can become much easier.



Grant Memorial Chapel

Celebrating life

Technology is revolutionizing the funeral service industry

Story by LISA SAVAGE

When Cody Gore began working in the funeral service industry about 15 years ago, he used a typewriter to complete obituaries and announcements. He scanned photos one at a time for use in slideshows during services.

As recently as eight years ago, he still used a typewriter for death certificate applications — a state requirement — before the process converted to an online option. “By then, nobody was using typewriters and it was hard to even find one, much less the ribbon and correction tape,” says Gore, manager at Grant Memorial Chapel.

Grant Memorial Chapel and New Hope Funeral Home have high-speed internet through NHTC, providing access to the technology that is changing the funeral service industry.

Now, funeral homes can utilize some of the most advanced technology available, allowing families to make arrangements online and choose products like caskets through virtual selection rooms. They also feature obituaries online and on social media platforms.

Gore worked at a different funeral home in 2008 when he talked to the owner about creating a website. “He was hesitant at first, but after the first quarter, he realized how many people viewed the website, and it became an important tool for us,” Gore says. Now, almost everyone in the funeral service industry uses websites and social media platforms to share information. They post obituaries, provide guidelines and product options for funeral planning, and allow for online condolences.

It’s not uncommon to use video technology for making funeral arrangements, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, Gore says. Sometimes, plans take place through FaceTime or Zoom. “It saves the families the time of having to come to the funeral home to make arrangements, especially if they’re from out of state,” he says. “Without the internet technology we now have, we wouldn’t be able to do all that we do.”



Cody Gore,
manager at Grant
Memorial Chapel.



Brad Spivey,
manager at New Hope
Funeral Home.

The virtual selection rooms are popular, providing photos and pricing without a family having to actually go into a room filled with caskets and vaults. State funeral home regulations require a facility to have at least eight caskets on display and available for anyone who wants to see them. However, the regulations do not require those making a purchase to see them in person. That's why the virtual selection rooms have become so popular, Gore says. "When people are grieving already, that can be overwhelming," he says. "It often makes it less stressful for the families at what usually is one of the most difficult times of their lives."

The Federal Trade Commission regulates contracts for funeral services and used to require a contract a family member would fill in by hand with a pen. Now, approved software provides contracts that the family can fill in and send through email or sign electronically. "All of the technology does make it a little easier on those in the funeral industry and the families, making a much more smooth process," Gore says.

CREATING NEW TRADITIONS

Gathering around the radio each morning to listen to obituaries used to be a thing in many households. Now it's more common to go to a website or social media to learn who has passed away in the community, says Brad Spivey, manager at New Hope Funeral Home.



"We've seen so many changes in recent years," he says. "When I first started in this industry, we didn't even have computers." An employee would type obituaries and then fax them to local media outlets.

Now, New Hope Funeral Home uses cloud-based software that has revolutionized operations. "We can set up anywhere and access all the same information," Spivey says. "Whether we're doing it on a desktop computer in the office or from a laptop somewhere on the premises or another location, what we can access is the same."

Spivey says having high-speed internet when using the cloud-based software makes a huge difference, but so does having access to customer service from a local company like NHTC. "If we've had any problems, the NHTC technicians have been right here to help us," he says.

FINDING THE BEST FIT

Whether it's formal or informal, traditional or offbeat, a funeral provides an opportunity for family and friends to gather and support one another in taking the first steps of their healing journey, Spivey says. A service can take place in any setting — at home, outdoors or at the funeral home — and can incorporate music, poetry or art in the celebration of life.

"There are endless possibilities for what the service can be, and we're honored to go above and beyond in our duty to meet your personalized and specific requests," Spivey says.

Current technology makes just about anything possible and plays a big role in the services the funeral home offers. But while technology provides a modern touch, compassion and traditions go back to the business's founding.

"While we utilize the technology available to us, we still want to provide the services that the families want," Spivey says. Some families prefer more traditional and personal service, doing everything on-premises. Other families now prefer taking care of all the details online or through email. "We will do what best fits the needs of those who utilize our services."

The funeral home has had a website for many years, but technology now allows many more possibilities. Not only does the funeral home post obituaries on its website, but it also shares them through social media like Facebook and Twitter. "We get a lot of feedback on Facebook," Spivey says. "Something might get shared 50 or 60 times, reaching thousands of people. We could never reach that many people without these advances in technology." 



Far from home

Broadband connects families across the globe



Story by KALEIGH COX

For Joshua and Kate Baker of Minnesota, welcoming their first child in 2019 was a time of joyful celebration and anticipation. Joshua Baker's parents, however, weren't close enough to celebrate in person, as they still live in his hometown over 1,000 miles away in New York.

Fortunately, the Bakers had broadband internet, so when they found out they would be parents, they turned to FaceTime to share their news. "With FaceTime, you get to see their emotion," Kate Baker says. "They were very excited!"

The Bakers are not alone. With the arrival of fast, reliable broadband, people aren't just connecting to the internet. They're connecting to one another. When families find themselves spread across the globe, the ability to connect instantly is a particularly special gift.

When their son, Micah, was born, the Bakers continued to use online apps and tools to keep his grandparents involved in his life. Planning a trip to meet in person would take significant time, money and coordinated effort. But the internet makes it easy to spontaneously pop on and connect anytime, just as two families living in the same town might do.

The Bakers also invited his parents to join Cluster, a social media app that enables users to share photos, videos and other updates with a small, private group of family and friends.



Joshua and Kate Baker use broadband to keep in touch with distant family.

Joshua Baker's mom, Faith Baker, was delighted. "We love to be as connected as we can," she says. "I can struggle with the separation and feel that we miss so much. I appreciate how they've found ways to overcome that."

Even 10-month-old Micah seems to appreciate the technology. “He recognizes his grandparents and understands who they are,” Kate Baker says.

She says being a new mom is busy, but staying connected online is worth the time and effort. “We’ll send pictures and keep communicating that way. It makes his grandparents feel included,” she says.

STAYING CONNECTED

For Jess and Sarah Curry in Texas, broadband wasn’t available in their early days of starting a family. As a military family navigating deployments, it was hard to stay connected. Jess Curry has left on deployment nine times over the past 20 years, and during those times, he would have to wait in line for an opportunity to check his email every few days. Even when videoconferencing technology became available, the inability to use it at home complicated things.

“We’d get all dressed up and drive to post to do a scheduled 15-minute video call,” Sarah Curry says. “There was so much pressure, and it seemed the kids would inevitably be melting down during the call. I would drive away feeling like I was supposed to be grateful, but I was miserable knowing my kids had cried through the call — and that seeing their dad for just a few minutes would only make them cry more.”

Thanks to advances in technology and a stronger internet connection, the most recent deployment was nothing like those early years. “He has Wi-Fi in his room and office, so we can talk on FaceTime every few days,” Sarah Curry says. “In between calls, the kids love using Marco Polo to record and send video messages

for their dad to watch and reply to when he can. Before, it was hard for the kids to be put on the spot and think of all the things they needed to say to him. Now, they can send what they want to say when they think about it. Especially for my teenagers — that’s been really helpful.”

With the steady communication, each kid’s relationship with their dad feels more natural and ongoing, even during deployment. He’s more present for the little moments, like when their 15-year-old daughter’s dance class tried to teach a parent to dance.

“We called up Dad and used the screen on the computer,” says Sarah Curry. “She taught him this dance, and they did it together on a split screen. He was in his uniform doing plies and other ballet moves. He’s going to do what it takes to connect with his daughter, even if it means he has to pirouette in his room.”

OPEN COMMUNICATION

In many families, the internet allows children to connect with people they may never have met otherwise. When Linda Martin of North Carolina adopted her son Max in 2008, people around her discouraged her from pursuing an open adoption.

“We wanted him to be able to ask questions and learn about his family history, but we had a lot of pushback,” Martin says. “People said that birth parents move on and lose interest.”

Thankfully, that hasn’t happened, she

says, and connecting online has helped. When Max was an infant, Martin shared photos and updates over email. As he grew, he began to pursue his own relationship with his birth mom, starting with phone calls with Martin present. Now, at 11 years old, Max likes using online apps to stay connected.

“We text a lot, and we use Instagram’s video call feature to talk face to face. I tell her everything, and I like to hear what’s going on in her life, too,” Max says. He shares pictures of his cat, gives updates when he loses a tooth and even made an excited video call when he landed the role of the Nutcracker in his ballet company’s production. He also gets to learn about his birth mom’s life. “She told me she went to Coachella the day after she found out she was pregnant with me,” he says. “So, technically, I can say I’ve been to Coachella.”

While Martin acknowledges that an open adoption isn’t right for everyone, she’s thankful for the ways her son has been able to know his birth mom. They met in person for his birthday last year, and the foundation of connecting online helped Max overcome any hesitations and enjoy the meeting. “It was really fun!” he says.

They hope to meet again when he turns 13, but in the meantime, he’s thankful for opportunities to share his life with her online. “We talk a lot now, and I get to tell her everything,” Max says. ☑



When Jess Curry was on deployment with the U.S. Army, broadband helped his family stay in touch.



After adopting Max, left, Linda Martin of North Carolina used broadband to help him stay in touch with his birth mother.

DEDICATED TO SERVE

New Hope native fulfills a dream at West Point

Story by LISA SAVAGE

Growing up in New Hope, Ryne Hicks knew he wanted to go places and do great things. He set his goals high and decided in high school to work toward a military career and attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, 50 miles north of New York City.

“It’s a perfect opportunity for a high-level education,” Hicks says. “I felt obliged to serve, and it is the best way for me to use the skill sets I’ve developed.”

Hicks reached his goal as one of about 1,100 graduates from West Point’s class of 2020 in June.

The event wasn’t exactly as he and his family had planned. The COVID-19 pandemic led to closed ceremonies, and graduates wore masks and observed social distancing guidelines. President Donald Trump addressed the cadets, who spread out, filling the parade field from one end to the other.

At one point, officials questioned whether ceremonies would take place. “When I first heard the news that we’d be returning for graduation, I was pretty apprehensive,” Hicks says. “Although the quarantine period was rough, getting to experience such a special moment with my closest friends and peers made everything worth it. I am forever thankful and will always cherish the memory.”

With no guests allowed, his family took in the livestreamed event at home with a watch party. “Words cannot express how proud we are of him and his accomplishments,” says his mother, Sharlene Bierbauer. “Seeing him all dressed up in uniform alongside his fellow second lieutenants, marching out onto the parade field for the graduation ceremony, evoked feelings of immense pride and joy. Hearing his name called, watching him receive his diploma and saluting the president was a moment I will never forget.”

MAKING A COMMITMENT

It’s a moment Hicks also dreamed of for years. He knew as a sophomore at New Hope High School he wanted to apply to West Point. “Ryne was a very smart, strong-willed child. We always knew that he was going to do great things,” his mother says. “He has always been very determined to succeed and puts everything he’s got into what he believes in.”

The lengthy application process required several letters of recommendation, high test scores and a commitment to serve in the U.S. Army for five years after graduation. When Hicks first mentioned going to West Point, his father, Chris Hicks, thought it unlikely someone from a small town would be accepted. “Now that he’s graduated, it seems surreal,” his father says. “Four years have gone by so fast.”

When Ryne Hicks first said goodbye to his family four years ago, he wrote his mother a letter.



West Point Graduating Class of 2020.

“In that letter, he wrote, ‘Mom, I promise I will graduate,’” she says. “Not once during the 48-month journey did I doubt him.”

Hicks never doubted, either, even as he faced a tough academic schedule and had to learn the mentally and physically challenging skill sets of a soldier. While at West Point, cadets dress in standard uniforms and perform many military functions and training, preparing them for future leadership roles. “The education at West Point teaches skills you won’t learn anywhere else,” Hicks says. “It blends the best of both worlds.”

HOMETOWN ADVANTAGE

Sharing his experience with others meant a lot to Hicks when he returned to his hometown in March during the military academy’s spring break.

As part of West Point’s Cadet Public Relations Council, Hicks planned visits to local schools to encourage students to consider West Point and explain the available opportunities.

He loved sharing details about the military academy, which began in 1802 as America’s first college of engineering and continues today as the world’s premier leader-development institution. It’s ranked among the top colleges in the country, and its mission remains constant to educate, train and inspire the corps of cadets so each graduate is a commissioned leader and prepared for a career to serve the nation as an officer in the U.S. Army.

The institution seeks candidates from small towns to add to the large, diverse culture at the campus. “West Point is a cultural melting pot,” Hicks says.

The pandemic-related cancellation of classes at local schools impeded most of his planned visits and delayed his own return to New York to complete the semester. The military academy used digital teaching and learning online, keeping school buildings closed to students for the remainder of the school year. Hicks stayed with his mother in Huntsville and his father in New Hope as he completed classes online. He returned to West Point two weeks before graduation.



Hicks reported to Fort Benning, Georgia, in August to fulfill his commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army within the Infantry branch. “He worked very hard for 48 months at West Point, and now, he will work very hard serving our great country,” his mother says. “Ryne has a deep love for his family and his country and a profound desire to protect both. We couldn’t be in better hands.”



Cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point receive their class rings. Ryne Hicks is the third cadet from the left.

Apples

in abundance

A Tennessee sustainable orchard offers many choices

Apple season around the South turns mountaintops and hillsides into beautiful shades of reds, greens and golds. Through the years, winds have swept across the Cumberland Plateau and deposited minerals into the land, creating topsoil perfect for growing fruits of all kinds — apples, specifically, at Wheeler’s Orchard atop Tennessee’s Fredonia Mountain.

It was 1974 when Wade Wheeler and his wife, Ann, left their home in Chattanooga, traveled north to Dunlap, Tennessee, and then on up Fredonia Mountain to settle with their children. Their land was perfect for farming — 50 acres in a gorge where cooler air protects plants from the scorching heat of summer and warm air from the valley guards tender vegetation in early spring. “Dad talked to some old-timers who told him that the man who once owned the property grew the best fruits on the mountain,” says his daughter, and the farm’s manager, Jane Wheeler Mauldin.

In 1978, the Wheelers planted their first apple trees — familiar old varieties like Granny Smith, Gala, Red Delicious and Golden Delicious. Fifteen years later, a second planting of newer varieties — Braeburn, Mutsu and Fujis — resulted in 10 acres of apple trees.



Jane Wheeler Mauldin manages Wheeler’s Orchard in Tennessee.

The Wheelers also lease land near Fall Creek Falls along the Cumberland Plateau where they grow Pink Lady and Arkansas Black apples, as well as a couple of heirloom varieties, Black Twig and Limber Twig.

Wheeler’s Orchard, one of the only sustainable orchards in the Southeast, grows 22 varieties of apples, and a third planting is scheduled. The orchard will soon bring some of the latest apples to market, including Harvey Cumberland and Ginger Gold.

Braeburn, though, is Mauldin’s favorite. “They’re an amazing apple for cider, to

cook with and to eat,” she says. “I like to pick them a little early — before they’re fully ripe — so they have a little bit more tang to them.” Every apple variety has a slightly different flavor. Some are better for eating, while others are best suited for baking. But some, such as Braeburn, pull double duty. These also include Granny Smith, Jonagold, Honeycrisp, Mutsu and Pink Lady.

Visit the orchard and pick your own apples, or buy them pre-picked in the orchard’s apple shop where shelves hold everything apple — fruit fresh from the orchard, homemade cider, apple butter, apple jelly and more. There are also local crafts, teas, soaps and honey here. And jelly made from the orchard’s grapes is a favorite each autumn.

Bring a picnic, spread out a blanket, and enjoy the cool mountain breeze.



FOOD EDITOR ANNE P. BRALY IS A NATIVE OF CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE.



OLD-FASHIONED APPLE CRISP

- 6 medium Braeburn or other crisp cooking apple, peeled and chopped
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 3/4 teaspoons ground cinnamon, divided
- 1 1/2 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- 3/4 cup old-fashioned oats
- 3/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup cold unsalted butter, diced into small cubes
- Pinch of kosher salt

Heat oven to 350 F. Butter an 8x8" baking dish. Set aside.

In a mixing bowl, add apples, sugar, 3/4 teaspoon of the cinnamon and lemon juice. Stir to combine, then transfer to the prepared baking dish.

In a separate mixing bowl, add brown sugar, oats, flour, remaining cinnamon, salt and diced cold butter. Use a pastry cutter or two forks to cut the butter into the oat mixture until it resembles pea-sized crumbs. Spread this topping over the apples in the baking dish and gently pat to even it out. Bake 40-50 minutes or until golden brown and bubbly. Serve with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, if desired.

HOMEMADE APPLESAUCE

This applesauce is delicious with oatmeal for breakfast or as a side to roasted pork for dinner.

- 3 Golden Delicious apples, peeled, cored and quartered
- 3 Fuji apples, peeled, cored and quartered
- 1 cup unfiltered apple juice
- 2 tablespoons cognac or brandy (or for a nonalcoholic substitution, apricot juice)
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

In a large saucepan, combine the apples and remaining ingredients. Bring to a soft boil and continue cooking until the

apples are soft, 20-30 minutes. Using a hand blender or potato masher, blend to desired consistency. Serve warm immediately or chill for later use.

Note: For a sweeter applesauce, add 2 tablespoons sugar. And you can use whatever apples are available, although combining two different varieties provides a richer flavor.

FRIED APPLES

This is an easy go-to dessert. The Wheeler family especially enjoys it around the holidays.

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 10 tart apples, peeled, cored and sliced
- 1-2 teaspoons cinnamon

- 2/3 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup water or apple cider

Melt butter in a skillet, then add the remaining ingredients. Simmer over medium heat, covered, until the apples are tender. Remove the lid from the pan and continue to cook until the liquid has reduced to a thick syrup, stirring occasionally, about 15 minutes. Delicious over vanilla ice cream. 🍷

If you go

Where: Wheeler's Orchard
956 Wheeler Road
Dunlap, Tennessee

When: The farm is open through December.

Information: wheelersorchard.com

Thank you!

NHTC sincerely appreciates all of the members of our community who have been hard at work keeping us safe during the COVID-19 crisis.



HEALTH CARE
PROFESSIONALS



FIRST
RESPONDERS



GROCERY STORE
EMPLOYEES



PHARMACY
EMPLOYEES



DELIVERY
DRIVERS



EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL
SUPPORT STAFF

The dedication, bravery and sacrifice demonstrated daily are an inspiration to us all. You and your families are on our minds and in our hearts during these difficult days. **THANK YOU** for all you do to keep our community safe and healthy!